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ABSTRACT

Being older rather than younger than most of one's classmates is presumed to provide benefits to students throughout elementary and secondary school. The present study investigated this age status hypothesis among students before and after the transition to middle school in sixth grade with respect to school strain, self-esteem, and grade point average (GPA). Students (N=84) completed questionnaires at four points in time: the end of fifth grade in elementary school, the beginning and end of sixth grade (middle school), and the end of seventh grade. The subjects were placed in one of five age status groups (arranged from youngest to oldest) for the analyses. Results provided support for the hypothesis. Partial correlation analyses, with father's education controlled, showed that age was positively associated with self-esteem and GPA during the fifth and sixth grades but not seventh grade. Strain was negatively associated with age status during fifth and early sixth grades only. Results suggest a developmental trend in which being younger than average has a temporary detrimental effect on adjustment that occurs before and immediately after the transition to middle school. (Author)

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Longitudinal Trends in the Effect of Age Status on Role Strain, Self-Esteem, and GPA during the Transition to Middle School

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ABSTRACT

Being older rather than younger than most of one's classmates is presumed to provide benefits to students throughout elementary and secondary school. The present study investigates this age status hypothesis among students before and after the transition to middle school in sixth grade with respect to school strain, self-esteem, and GPA. Eighty-four students completed questionnaires at 4 points in time: the end of fifth grade in elementary school, the beginning and end of sixth grade (middle school), and the end of seventh grade. The subjects were placed in one of 5 age status groups (arranged from youngest to oldest) for the analyses. Results provided support for the hypotheses. Partial correlation analyses, with father's education controlled, showed that age was positively associated with self-esteem and GPA during the fifth and sixth grades but not seventh grade. Strain was negatively associated with age status during fifth and early sixth grade only. Results suggest a developmental trend in which being younger than average has a temporary detrimental effect on adjustment that occurs before and immediately after the transition to middle school.

Longitudinal Trends in the Effect of Age Status on Role Strain, Self-Esteem, and GPA during the Transition to Middle School

Parents and teachers continue to address the question of whether to begin children in school when they are younger than the average age of their classmates or wait until they are older. Decisions to delay entry of children into first grade whose birthdays fall in the second half of the calendar year are not uncommon, especially for boys. Parents often make such decisions based on the idea that waiting a year improves the child's chances for academic and social success in school because he will be more socially mature in another year.

Research suggests that the decision to wait a year tends to benefit some children, at least during the early elementary school years. Younger children appear to have more difficulties than older children in a number of arenas during the primary school years. For example, younger children have been shown to be classified learning disabled more frequently than older children (Diamond, 1983) and to perform less well academically in grades 1 through 4 (Sweetland & De Simone, 1987). In addition, Di Pasquale, Moule, and Flewelling (1980) found an age effect wherein more referrals for school problems were reported during the primary grades among younger boys but not girls.

There is some evidence to suggest that the benefits of delaying entering school until an older age tend to disappear during later childhood or early adolescence. For example, the age effect found by Sweetland and De Simone (1987) became less pronounced in grades 5 and 6 than it did in the earlier grades. In a retrospective study, Sandoval and Fitzgerald (1985) found no difference in high school academic performance between students who delayed first grade entrance (attending a junior first grade program for a year) and those who did not.

Self-esteem has been found to increase with age during adolescence (McCarthy & Hoge, 1982), though not all researchers have observed this trend (cf., Wylie, 1979). Where these developmental differences have been found, studies have employed middle and older adolescents and not early adolescents. In addition, self-esteem differences between younger and older students in the same grade level have not been reported. The present study is designed to address age differences in self-esteem among early adolescents at the same grade level.

Role strain is the perceived difficulty people experience in the exercise of normal social roles, such as the role of student (Pearlin, 1983). It has been suggested that children and early adolescents may experience strain as a result of conflicts and other difficulties associated with their student role (Fenzel,

1989). Increased strain has been associated with diminished self-esteem and school performance among early adolescents (Fenzel, under review).

Under consideration in the present study is whether age status impacts the magnitude of role strain experienced by older children and early adolescents. Although this question has not previously been addressed in the literature, the work on self-esteem differences suggests that older children may experience less stress than older students at the same grade level.

The present study attempts to determine whether the supposed benefits of being older than most of one's classmates extend into the later elementary and middle school years. Benefits were examined with respect to school performance (GPA), self-esteem, and strains associated with school. Though some research suggests that academic performance differences will disappear by fifth grade, little research has been reported on the effect of age differences on self-esteem and perceived school stress after grade 4.

Because of the temporary difficulties often brought on by a school transition during early adolescence, it is expected that age differences will persist until students settle into the new school environment in seventh grade, one year after the transition takes place. Therefore, it is hypothesized that younger students will experience

greater difficulty, evidenced by lower self-esteem, lower grades, and higher levels of strain, than older students through fifth and sixth grade during the middle school transition.

Method

The present study is part of a 3-year longitudinal study of the transition to a 6-8 middle school in a small city school district. Complete longitudinal data were collected from 84 of the 120 students who began the study. (Family and achievement factors for the longitudinal sample did not differ from those of students lost during the study.) Subjects completed the 27-item Early Adolescent School Role Strain Inventory (Fenzel, 1989) and the Self-Perception Profile for Children (Harter, 1985), which contained a self-esteem subscale, at four points in time: late in fifth grade, early and late in sixth grade, and late in seventh grade. Grades were obtained from teachers (in 5th grade) and official school records (in middle school).

Students were divided into 5 age status groups of approximately equal cell counts, with "1" representing the youngest and "5" the oldest. (Students who repeated one or more grades were excluded from the analyses.)

Results and Discussion

Preliminary first order partial correlation analyses, outlined in Table 1, showed a "developmental" trend in the

effect of age status on the adjustment indicators of self-esteem, strain, and GPA, controlling for father's educational level. This control was used to eliminate the potentially confounding effects of family background on age status (i.e., more educated parents may tend to make more deliberate choices about when to start the child in school). As predicted, age status significantly affected adjustment during the early stages of a school transition and the latter weeks of fifth grade. Also as predicted the age status effect disappeared by the time the student completed the second year in middle school (seventh grade).

Findings suggest that younger students may require an especially attentive eye before and during the transition to middle school. More importantly, however, these results suggest that such adjustment difficulties are temporary although they may not disappear as early as previous research has suggested. Children who are older than most of their classmates appeared to benefit in terms of higher self-esteem and GPAs and lower levels of role strain than younger students during fifth and sixth grade. By the time early adolescents reach the end of seventh grade, the second year of middle school, age appears to have little effect on self-esteem, strain, or school performance.

Of course, it is possible that without the school transition, the disappearance of age differences in these variables may have occurred sooner than in seventh grade. The transition to a larger, more heterogenous middle school where one is among the youngest students in the school may accentuate what might be only small age differences had the subjects remained in the smaller, more intimate elementary school.

Despite the developmental trend in which being younger than average has a temporary effect on adjustment that occurs before and immediately after the transition to middle school, findings suggest that student age relative to classmates is not a crucial factor in school adjustment during early adolescence. Because these age differences do seem to disappear by seventh grade, if not sooner, the decision whether to delay the entrance to first grade may be made by parents with a minimum of anxiety about the child's adjustment to school during early adolescence.

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Table 1

Partial Correlations of Self-Esteem, School Strain, and GPA with Age Status Over Time Controlling for Father's Education

Time of Assessment	Adjustment Variable		
	Self-Esteem	Strain	GPA
Late 5th Grade	.17+	-.23*	.20*
Early 6th Grade	.26*	-.22*	.20*
Late 6th Grade	.22*	-.12	.16+
Late 7th Grade	-.07	-.01	.11

* $p < .05$ + $p < .10$